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ABSTRACT

The rural communities of the North American Great Plains are experiencing fundamental economic and social changes that threaten their very existence. While local projects offer hope for survival, many communities lack the knowledge needed to envision and evaluate their possible futures. As a consequence, communities may pursue survival strategies that offer short-term solutions but condemn the town's long-term sustainability. This paper details an anticipatory and participatory planning process for a "learning community." The process assumes the presence of a community development professional whose role is primarily that of an educator who helps to develop the community's capacity to plan for itself. The process is essentially a systems analysis, problem-solving approach that may be described as "community self-actualization." Community design alternatives are created using organizational development techniques that focus on small-group learning activities. Techniques include transcendental imaging, futuring activities that anticipate possible effects of participant choices, and the development of consensus goals. The learning community then embarks on a self-study based on sociocultural, economic, and environmental aspects of sustainability. The previously generated community alternatives are evaluated on the basis of sustainability checklists. Multicommunity collaboration is explored and encouraged. The plan for the preferred future of each of the community's elements is officially adopted, followed by implementation and monitoring activities. Contains 26 references, a chart of the learning community process, and an example from an environmental checklist. (Author/SV)

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THE LEARNING COMMUNITY SURVIVAL AND SUSTAINABILITY ON THE PLAINS

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THE LEARNING COMMUNITY SURVIVAL AND SUSTAINABILITY ON THE PLAINS

Joseph Luther — USA

ABSTRACT

The rural communities of the American Great Plains are experiencing fundamental changes in their economy and their society. Such changes threaten the very existence of these small towns. While local projects offer hope for survival, many of these communities lack the knowledge needed to envision and evaluate their possible futures. As a consequence, communities may pursue survival strategies that offer only short-term solutions but condemn their town's long-term sustainability, as well as that of neighboring communities. This paper details an anticipatory and participatory planning process for a "learning community." This process features a normative reeducative methodology to achieve a shared vision of a preferable future. Community design alternatives are created utilizing organizational development techniques that focus on small group learning activities. These alternatives are evaluated on the basis of sustainability checklists. Multicommunity collaboration is explored and encouraged. In this approach, paradigms may be shifted, values changed, and behavior modified as the community learns the implications of long-term sustainability versus the perils of short-term survival.

On the Great Plains of North America, rural small towns are facing desperate choices. Most of these communities are less than 150 years old and originated in the agricultural settlement movement of the mid to late 1800's. As agricultural farm-to-market centers, the communities have reached the apparent end of their life-cycle. The traditional economic activities in these small rural towns have been disappearing as a consequence of changes in agricultural practices and markets (Ekstrom & Leistritz, 1988; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1989).

These rural small towns, facing such peril, believe they must adapt or perish. Communities across the Great Plains are in search of solutions to their plight. Such solutions often are at variance with the traditional agrarian paradigm of the plains (Swanson, 1990). Non-farm economic enterprises are becoming essential to the local community's future (Economic Policy Council, 1990).

THE WORTH OF A PLACE

These communities are seeking survival. Long after the land economic rationale for their existence has disappeared, these communities seek to survive and persist for cultural reasons. This is a different way of looking at the worth of a place. Certainly the Lakota Sioux have a different way of perceiving their Great Plains. They have a strong mythology that deals with a more spiritual landscape than a physical landscape. The spiritual landscape that is found within the heart of the learning community determines how they perceive and value their place, their town. We can't say a community will die simply because it no longer has an economic value (Duncan, 1993).

Cultural survival may mean the development of alternative economic bases within the small town. Survival, in this case, may mean the importation of a radically new economic activity that holds the promise of employment and the needed tax revenues, but at what price?

Offered the prospect of jobs in areas of high unemployment, and tax revenues in the face of obsolete and crumbling infrastructure and inadequate services, these community leaders are motivated by the short-term benefits. Community leaders have few tools with which to examine the true costs of new development and concurrent change in their town and region. Apparently, the long-term costs are not so easily envisioned and may be discounted by the present generation.

THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY

The future of the small town on the Great Plains is bound up in the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development is a new concept of economic growth: a process of change in which all policies are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable. The concept of sustainability requires more equitable distribution and equal opportunities. Environmental concerns must become an integral part of decision-making at all levels (Panos Institute, 1987). The primary goal of any economic or environmental policy should be sustainable development. Environmental design must take its place alongside cost, safety, and health as a guiding criterion for development (National Commission on the Environment, 1993).

In its barest essence, a sustainable community is "one that satisfies its needs without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations ....Inherent in this definition is the responsibility of each generation to ensure the next one inherits an undiminished natural and economic endowment ... This concept of intergenerational equity, profoundly moral in character, is violated in numerous ways by our current society" (Brown, Flavin & Postel, 1990, p. 173-174).

Sustainability is a critical choice if a community seeks to survive and persist beyond the current generation. The dilemma forms before the leaders of the rural small town. Do they have an obligation to the next generation? Is there a sense of intergenerational equity?

Even more obscure is impact of choice on one's neighboring communities. Although the concept of multicommunity collaboration is only now beginning to flower on the plains, the reality is still one of "dog-eat-dog" competition for whatever scraps of economic development may be available in the short-term. The success of one community venture is often at the expense of the other communities. There is little legislative or cultural compulsion to cause a community to examine the long-term, regional effect of development.

However, multicommunity collaboration is seen as one of the few viable means of survival and persistence of rural small towns. Only through multicommunity collaboration can essential services be continued to regions of economic transformation and declining population. "By several communities working together, leadership skills, tax revenues, political influence, and other factors may be pooled to undertake relatively larger initiatives, both economic and social in nature. Also, development may become more sustainable" (Baker, 1993, p. 12).

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

The learning community process seeks consensus based upon a single shared vision of the community's preferred future. Such consensus and shared vision require changes in paradigms, shifts in reality, and changes in perception and values.

If a town hall meeting is held and everyone is asked to sit down around the table and describe their vision of the future, it will soon be discovered that there are multiple visions. Each participant, based upon their perception of reality, will correctly describe an image of the future based upon their experiences and values (LeShan, 1976).

This is a limited vision. As the old proverb says, "to the blind change comes suddenly." It is difficult for participants to imagine that which they have not experienced or learned about. The vision of the future is limited to an extrapolation of the known. It is a principle of continuity in which we slowly push yesterday past today into tomorrow. But the problem with today is that tomorrow is not what it was yesterday.

Imperatives and Externalities

Strategic planning appeared in recent years as a community activity to encourage economic development. The environmental scan, as an element of strategic planning, is an activity that serves as a catalyst for community visions. The environmental scan not only seeks to look over the horizon of the known world of the community, but it also scans and reports on emerging imperatives from the larger systems outside the community. These externalities

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are anticipated influences that may be perceived as threats or opportunities for the future of the community. This is an elementary community learning process.

Conflict arises because there are multiple visions or realities within the perception of the community itself. The learning community must move beyond strategic planning methods and utilize techniques and methods that will create a shared vision, a common paradigm of the community system. Only then can external influences and change be discovered and intelligently evaluated.

Change Strategies

How can the learning community create a shift in individual and collective paradigms? The answer is found in the classical theory and practice of organizational development, behavioral sciences and adult continuing education processes. There are three traditional categories of change strategies that can be employed in the learning community. These are the empirical-rational strategies, the normative-reeducative strategies, and the power-coercive strategies (Chin and Beene, 1976, p. 22-45).

Applying the normative reeducative strategies to the learning community means that changes in behavior are changes at the personal individual level and at the socio-cultural level, in both values and actions. These changes are alterations in the normative structures, in institutionalized roles and relationships, as well as in cognitive and perceptual orientations.

THE LEARNING COMMUNITY PROCESS

This is a process for developing a community plan over a period of two or more years. This process and its products will meet the various statutory and professional requirements for community planning in the Great Plains region. Compliance with these requirements is important if the community is going to use its governmental powers to shape and control change through devices such as zoning, subdivision, building and infrastructure regulations.

Programs of anticipating change and dealing with change are focused on community planning. Planning is, after all, the use of forethought in community actions. The learning community, seeking a preferred future, must create the strategy, the road map, the path to the achievement of this vision. Planning is a learning process that is both participatory and anticipatory. It is anticipatory as a process that, according to the prime directive of community development, enables the members of the community to participate in the decisions that affect their lives (Luther, 1991).

This is also an anticipatory learning process in that the members of the community seek to anticipate the consequence of their actions rather than merely reacting to them. It is a matter of proactive versus reactive community action.

Capacity Building

There is an important point here. The learning community approach, described in this paper, assumes presence of a community development professional as a consultant to the community. The role of the community developer in this learning community process is primarily that of educator rather than technical consultant. In this approach, the role of the consultant is to develop the capacity and ability of the community to plan for itself over the long run. If the community development consultants do this well, they will never have to return (Luther & Luther, 1981).

The Process

The learning community process is essentially a systems analysis, problem solving approach. The flow chart in Figure 1 illustrates how this process works in the community setting. Each of the major components of the learning community process will be discussed in following sections of this paper.

PROBLEM RECOGNITION

Typically, problem recognition starts with a few individuals who become concerned and seek to deal with the problem. These few individuals are generally the core of the initial stages of the participatory learning community process. The community developer may use the core group as the foundation for larger community participation in the process. The community developer shares information with them on how to conduct the participatory process.

GOALS SETTING

The first public "town hall" meeting is announced as a goals setting activity. This is a traditional community development strategy except that the activities use small group futuring exercises to obtain visions of a preferred community future, rather than just a reactive future based on trend extrapolation. The goals setting process is essentially asking the question, "how do you wish your community to appear and function in the future?"

Transcendental Imaging

The learning community's vision of the future is often limited to the domain of its education and experience. If they haven't seen it or read about it, how can citizens imagine it? The goals setting activity includes images from video, film, or slides, which illustrate possible futures. It is the beginning of the community learning process—discovering and imagining possible futures. Often times, these new images (both good and bad) serve as a catalyst and stimulate the community into seeking radically new goals or, at least, significant departures from their current development trends.

Transcendental imaging is useful in helping the learning community to escape the bounds of the local system domain by exploring the examples of communities from other geographic regions, from other cultures and from other times. "The eschatological or transcendent, is an element which enables the visionary to breach the bonds of the cultural present and mentally encompass the possibility of a totally other type of society, not dependent on what human beings are capable of realizing" (Boulding, 1976, p. 431-444). There may be an image, a solution, visualized in the small rural towns of Australia, Ireland, Italy, China, or Israel. The first part, then, of the goals setting activity is given to a presentation of images of possible futures.

Futuring Activities

Futuring activities are used in this part of the meeting. Rather than simply reacting to their expected or probable future, based on trend extrapolation, participants are asked to create a qualitative and compelling vision of a preferred future, free from the bounds of history, probability and trend extrapolation (Ziegler, 1991, p. 516-527). Focus questions are based on the topics for the community's plan: commercial development, industrial development, services, residential development, recreation and parks, agriculture, infrastructure, transportation, historic preservation. Each small group is asked to describe their vision of how this aspect of the community should appear in the long-term, usually 20 years in the future.

Anticipatory Learning

A follow-on meeting utilizes futuring techniques to learn about the possible effects of the participant's choices. Here, the effort is to anticipate the effects of change. Futuring techniques are used explore the implications of these choices. This is both an anticipatory and participatory community learning process.

At the end of this second town hall meeting, participants are asked to vote on the vision statements. The choices from this vote become the basis for the community's long-range goals. The results are transcribed, typed and made available to the public.

Consensus Goals

These goals are not a priori given, but were derived from the community learning activities and intelligent choices. The

consensus agreement on the goals statements represents one element of the single shared vision of a preferred future. The validity of these community visions as goals is verified by the use of a community-wide attitudinal survey.

COMMUNITY SURVEY AND ANALYSIS

The learning community is now faced with the task of discovering the path from today to tomorrow. In order to understand what could be and should be, the community needs to learn what it was and what it is.

Self-Study

The means to learning at a community scale include the use of the residents, of all ages, in exploring, describing, and explaining the community's environment—its operating system domain. Ad hoc work groups, consisting of "community analysts," are formed to conduct these studies. Each work group has a specific task and the group is dissolved once the task is completed. The work groups report regularly to the large group—the community. Immediate rewards are provided for involvement in the learning community process by featuring news stories about the groups' work, or having them give reports at town hall meetings, or making their reports available in the public library.

This is the heart of the learning community process. It is an act of self-study. Members are telling, drawing, mapping, writing and explaining how their community operates and why. The importance of phenomena and processes at work in the community's environment are made explicit. As these information reports are shared, the paradigms in the community slowly begin to shift as individuals begin to assimilate the system-wide information and form a new reality in their minds. Slowly, values and behaviors will follow these shifts.

The extensive use of maps and graphics allows for the display of non-quantifiable and intangible socio-cultural and environmental values. Because they appear in visual form, they cannot be ignored. Because they are mapped, they have locality relevance. The use of realistic visual symbols creates a single vision, with little of the ambiguity of interpretation common to written and oral reports.

Checklists for Sustainability

The learning community's self-study is based on the tripartite aspect of sustainability. That is, the socio-cultural, economic and environmental aspects of the community's operating environment are explored, described and explained. This approach provides the framework for survey and analysis.

Environmental checklists seem to provide the best model for the learning community's survey and analysis. There is an example of an environmental checklist shown in Figure 2. But the tripartite nature of sustainability demands that the environmental checklist be enhanced to provide a meaningful framework for sustainability. Such a checklist will serve, not only at this initial planning point but also in the later monitoring and feedback stages of the learning community process, to evaluate change.

Such a checklist for sustainability will serve as an educational tool for it will provide the means of easily assessing the value of existing phenomena and processes, as well as the probable effect of proposed changes to their existing community system. The use of the sustainability checklist, repeatedly, by local decision-makers, will reinforce learning by the individual decision-makers and learning by the community.

Sustainability checklists are being researched and developed by many individuals and organizations at this time. Although there is little literature currently available, there are a number of discussion groups on the Internet. The search for indicators is the subject of significant future research (Callenbach, Capra, Goldman, Lutz, and Marburg, 1993).

Economic survey and analysis. The economic values must be analyzed in terms of the community's existing situation. This survey and analysis will describe the existing economic phenomena and processes. Such a survey and analysis will also provide information regarding unsatisfied potential and derive marketing information that can be used to recruit new economic activities to meet the unsatisfied potentials.

Such economic survey and analysis can also allow the community to conduct contingency analysis to determine the answers to the "what if" questions. Having set up the description of existing economic situations on a spreadsheet program, it is very easy to use the recalculation function of the computer program to discover and describe what would happen if the population grew or declined at varying rates. The community analysts can also determine what would happen if their town consumed all the regional market in any given category.

This latter capability to model regional economic impacts of community market decisions is critical in determining the sustainability of the regional community. This is important to multicommunity collaboration. This capability to visualize potential economic change enables the learning community to anticipate the consequences of their actions. Moral and ethical issues of multicommunity collaboration may arise when the learning community must decide whether to take business away from a competing community and thus adversely affecting that community's sustainability.

Typically, the economic survey and analysis is based on a comprehensive and standardized framework that may become the basis of a learning community checklist. The framework includes the traditional categories of economic activity. This economic survey and analysis framework is then used to array data regarding existing capacities in terms of available square feet of gross leasable floor space and total sales per square foot. Analysis of existing population and the market area will derive potential sales per square foot. Reference to trade publications will derive typical sales per square foot. The community analyst can easily determine if the existing community is operating at, below or above its potential. These data also make it easy to forecast "what would happen if," based on changing population variables (Luther, 1979).

Issues regarding the evaluation of these economic activities, including cost-benefit analysis, sustained returns, intergenerational economic welfare, and green economics are now emerging in the literature in publications such as Clem Tisdell's (1993) *Environmental Economics: Policies for Environmental Management and Sustainable Development*.

Socio-cultural survey and analysis. This activity seeks to determine the community's attitudes or values regarding its existing and potential situation. The goals setting process, employing futuring techniques, is one means of collecting such information. This group process information is usually augmented by a thorough survey of the community. In a small rural town, a 100 percent survey may be possible. In larger communities, a sample methodology may have to be used to survey only a portion of the community's population.

The goals statements derived from the town hall meeting, in combination with the community attitudinal survey, will answer a number of questions. Not only can the community analyst find out what types of change are desirable or undesirable, but also determine where within the community such change is acceptable. Maps and sketches will enable the community to accept or reject various types of development or changes in various geographic locations. These socio-cultural values can then be arrayed as a series of questions to be used in the sustainability checklist.

Environmental survey and analysis. This activity generally proceeds on the basis of an environmental checklist, such as those employed in environmental impact assessment. As these data are collected, it is important to give them social value. One effective mean of giving social value to intangible and unquantifiable environmental phenomena and process is to use a graphic device for storing, manipulating and disseminating these data. In fact, the use of such a graphic device will allow the community analyst to convert the data into meaningful information.

The graphic device is known as "McHargian analysis" and employs a mapping technique to record the character and distribution of environmental phenomena and process (McHarg, 1969). These

data are displayed on standardardized base maps, allowing "stacking" of the maps into composites to yield information regarding synergistic groups of phenomena and process. The strength of this approach is that these phenomena and processes cannot be ignored: they are rendered explicitly in color. There is also the power of locality relevance. The learning community is able to determine how proposed changes will affect these environmental attributes. Similarly, the community may learn how the existing environmental attributes will affect a proposed action. The invisible is rendered visible.

The McHargian approach is useful in providing a basic understanding of the historical and existing environmental situation of the community. The maps and information provide a foundation from which all future proposals may be evaluated. It is a major asset in the learning community. As these analyses are conducted by ad hoc work groups with in the community, there is a great deal of knowledge generated and shared with credibility. The McHargian approach relies upon existing scientific data that are timely and accurate.

The sustainability checklist. The critical aspects of sustainability, economic, socio-cultural and environmental values, can be surveyed and analyzed in a comprehensive and standardized approach by using a sustainability checklist. Each major section of the checklist provides not only the list of items for survey and analysis, but also provides guidance as to what the analyst wants to find out—what the research question should be.

These three categories of community survey and analysis provide the basis of understanding what was and what is in the community's environmental domain. From this base, projections and forecasts may be devised to learn about what could be and, more importantly, what should be.

Some guidance on elements of a sustainable community is discussed in a recent report from the Centre for Human Settlements at the University of British Columbia (Roseland, 1992). This book, *Toward Sustainable Communities: A Resource Book for Municipal and Local Governments*, illustrates how communities can apply the concepts of sustainability in governmental functions.

FORECASTS AND PROJECTIONS

Traditionally visions of the community's future are based upon quantitative trend analysis. This is very different from the qualitative visioning activities used to create community goals. In this manner, the historical pattern of growth (typically population growth) is extrapolated into the future.

The learning community approach recognizes that the probable future is only one of many possible futures. Accepting the premise that trend is not destiny, the learning community seeks to "bend the trend" and visualize futures in a very different way. Escaping the paradigm with which we have been programmed, the community seeks to imagine and describe a possible future, however improbable.

A number of "possible futures" projections are made, all of which meet the goals of the community. If their community has a declining population but wishes to have steady state population or growth in the population, this is described as a possible future. If, on the other hand, the community feels it is growing too big, too rapidly, the community may wish to explore the possibility of a steady state.

Keying in on population projections for each possible future condition, the learning community can identify the quantitative demands for land use, transportation, and services. This demand analysis can be used to establish a needs statement, what is called a "need gap," for each possible future community state.

COMMUNITY NEEDS AND OBJECTIVES

The learning community may, at this point, reject a number of quantitative projections whose demands fall far outside the realm of reality or the community's capacity to achieve. Still other projections are rejected because they do not meet the community's goals. There will be, however, a significant number of projected community futures that meet the community's goals and are, at first analysis, achievable. These images began to form the basis of a preferred future.

This activity of forecasting and projecting future demands for land use, transportation, and services is another critical action for the learning community. While some members of the community formerly believed one image or another represented the only reality, this learning activity has the capacity to cause paradigm shifts as the true demands of various possible futures are disclosed.

The estimation of the forecasted needs of the community creates a series of targets to be achieved by alternatives. These targets, in terms of the demands of different community configurations, become the objectives for a series of sketch plans.

ALTERNATIVES AND SKETCH PLANS

The learning community uses ad hoc work groups to create a series of sketch plans of possible future conditions. These sketch plans illustrate land use, transportation, and services—all which will meet the projected needs. These illustrations take the form of colored maps and three-dimensional sketches of critical elements of the landscape and townscape. At this point, the community is involved in participatory design.

The learning community can and should rediscover the traditional townscape elements that represent its heritage. These historical elements are important basis of a unique sense of place in time and space. Visual techniques, as well as images, for this activity may be found in books such as Randall Arendt's (1994) *Rural by Design: Maintaining Small Town Character*.

Participatory Design

Participatory design empowers the learning community to create visual images of its environmental domain. The drawing pencil is removed from the hand of the professional architect or landscape architect or planner and firmly placed in the hands of the members of the community design work group (Luther, 1990, p. 33-56).

These three-dimensional sketches, like the environmental analysis, provide the foundation from which to evaluate change. For each of the alternative sketch plans, these human-scale, eye-level, renderings of street scenes, landscapes, and building facades are modified to show, realistically, what would happen as a consequence of such changes.

A good handbook for the participatory design approach is Randolph Hester's (1990) *Community Design Primer*. This handbook not only provides knowledge about community design as a participatory activity, but it also teaches skills in drawing and problem-solving by design.

The power of the three-dimensional illustration easily overpowers the traditional two-dimensional maps of the planner. The learning community can visualize what it would be like to walk and drive through this townscape, to work in this future town, to play in this future landscape.

Moreover, the community design work group can add even more realistic power to this vision of the future by rendering the images in a four-dimensional aspect. That is, the change is shown over a time series, rather than the typical one-shot image of the completed state. Such time series illustrations enable the learning community to understand that change is incremental and comes at a certain pace rather than all at once. This lessens the shock of change.

THE PREFERRED FUTURE

The learning community must now make an informed and intelligent choice from these alternative sketch plans—these alternative images of the future of their town. How do they proceed?

The sustainability checklist is again employed as a learning and decision-making device. Each alternative is evaluated according to

the checklist. The costs and benefits of each sketch plan are described and explained.

At another community-wide town hall meeting, the alternative sketch plans and the analysis of their sustainability, are displayed on the walls in a manner to allow examination and discussion by the learning community. This meeting features a presentation of each alternative sketch plan, and a discussion of the finding of the sustainability analysis.

The members of the learning community may select one alternative, may reject all alternatives, or may synthesize several alternative sketch plans into a new vision. But, at the end of the evening, the learning community has selected an image of its preferred future. The learning community has achieved a single shared vision.

THE COMMUNITY'S PLAN

The selected sketch plan is then fully developed by another ad hoc work group. The details of the plan, meeting professional and statutory requirements, are published in a document that is the preliminary draft of the town's comprehensive plan. Make no mistake, this is the community's plan. It is not a plan devised by some short-term visiting technical consultant. This is a plan devised by the learning community in a clear act of self-help and self-determination. Having ownership in the plan is essential to maintaining and enhancing the plan over time.

Following the public review of the preliminary draft of the community's plan, it is adopted by resolution and becomes an official document of the community's decision-making process. All future proposals for change will be evaluated on the basis of this plan.

Format

The format of the community plan emphasizes the essential elements of the town: the land use, transportation, services, recreation, historic preservation, etc. Each element of the plan forms a separate chapter in the document. Each chapter starts with the description of the preferred future. Remember the focus questions in the first town hall meeting? For each chapter there will be goals and objectives. Following the vision and the need, there will be policy statements that represent the community's voice, speaking in unison, of how it prefers this vision to be achieved and sustained. Finally, each chapter contains the details of how this image of the preferred future will be transformed from imagination to grass, concrete, steel, wood, and water. The sustainability checklist emerges as measures of effectiveness for each element of design and development. These written and graphic policies and guidelines, then, seek to teach the newcomer, the proposer of change, the values of the learning community.

Proposed actions that represent only short-term survival activities that do not effectively achieve the community's criteria for sustainability should be rejected by this decision-making process. Given the anticipatory and participatory character of the plan's development, there should be little community conflict in these decisions.

Implementation

Implementation of the community's plan can be achieved through sustainable policies, regulations, and building codes, such as those developed by Melbourne, Australia. Here, the Victorian Department of Planning initiated a series of workshops, "Shaping Urban Futures," in 1989. The resulting regulations, the *Victorian Code for Residential Development* (VicCode), are "directed at achieving safe, stimulating, and sustainable communities by addressing the detailed design of development proposals" (Morris, 1993, p. 50-52).

Implementation can also be achieved by developing a tactical plan of action based on the objectives and targets created in this planning process. A series of self-help local development initiatives, such as those introduced in Australia with the Country Centres Project (Robinson, 1993). This project facilitated local self-help processes in localities suffering from the effects of structural change, a conditional similar to that found on America's Great Plains. The County Centres Project, for example, sought to:

- improve local economic performance by identifying viable local economic opportunities and coordinating means for their realization;
- improve federal and state government awareness of local needs so that a better coordinated and more effective targeting/delivery of their programs could occur at the local level, and
- develop effective models for the participation of community groups in self-help local development.

A significant discussion of the community economic development strategies

being undertaken on the Great Plains may be found in Choy and Rounds (1992) *Community Development Strategies of the Northern Plains*.

Monitoring

Over time, a monitoring function is created as the condition of the community system domain is scanned and changes are noted. Like a thermostat, the learning community reacts to the change and causes a corresponding change in its governing functions to correct the condition. It is as if the learning community is traveling through time and space on a critical path. The boundaries of this path represent parameters of unacceptable or unsustainable system behavior. The learning community, monitoring its environment, senses the deviation from the critical path and issues instructions to bring the community back to the desired trajectory into the future—ever in quest of its goals.

CONCLUSION

What has education got to do with all this? The role of learning is critical in capacity building among the members of the community. Capacity building enables the community to imagine, visualize, plan, design, develop, and sustain the community as it moves forward into the future. It is an act of local self-determination and self-help.

In an age of increasingly scarce resources available for small rural towns, the capacity to "do it ourselves for ourselves" is critical to the survival and persistence of the community. In an activity that may be described as "community self-actualization," the rural small town explores, discovers, describes and explains the elements, attributes, and synergy of its total operating environmental system. The learning community not only conducts this survey and analysis, but it learns about itself in the process.

Community learning leads to shared understanding and knowledge about the economic, socio-cultural and environmental phenomena and processes at work in the community. Community learning leads to knowledge and skill in evaluating proposed changes that may affect these operating systems within the community's domain. Community learning leads to an understanding of the need for and consequences of multicommunity collaboration as a means of sustainability. Community learning results in a declaration, the community voice, expressing a clear and compelling vision of its own future—a future of its own making.

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Figure 1: The Learning Community Process

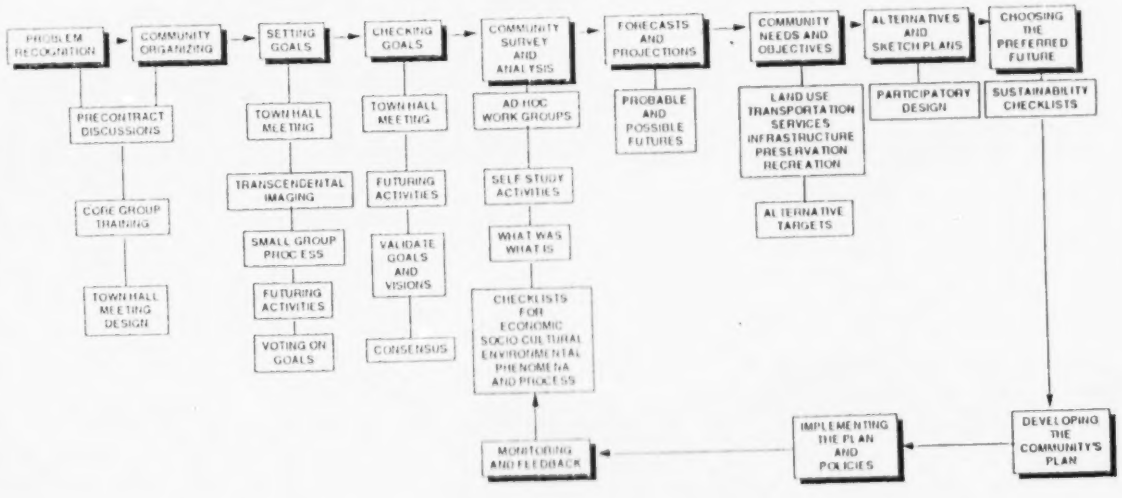

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Figure 2: An Example from an Environmental Checklist

(14) Public Services. Will the proposal have an effect upon , or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas:

(a) Fire protection?.....

(b) Police protection? .....

(c) Schools?.....

(d) Parks or other recreational facilities?.....

(e) Maintenance of public facilities, including roads? ....

(f) Other governmental services? .....

Explanation: .....

.....

(15) Energy. Will the proposal result in:

(a) Use of substantial amounts of fuel or energy? .....

(b) Demand upon existing sources of energy, or require the development of new sources of energy? .....

Explanation: .....

.....

(16) Utilities. Will the proposal result in a need for new systems, or alterations to the following utilities:

(a) Power or natural gas? ....

(b) Communications systems?.....

(c) Water? .....

(d) Sewer or septic tanks? .....

(e) Storm water drainage?..... .....

(f) Solid waste and disposal?.....

(17) Human Health. Will the proposal result in the creation of any health hazard or potential health hazard (excluding mental health)?

Explanation: .....

.....

(18) Aesthetics. Will the proposal result in the obstruction of any scenic vista or view open the the public, or will the proposal result in the creation of an aesthetically offensive site open to public view?

Explanation: .....

.....

(19) Recreation. will the proposal result in an impact upon the quality or quantity of existing recreational opportunities?

Explanation: .....

(20) Archeological/Historical. Will the proposal result in an alteration of a significant archeological or historical site, structure, object or building?

Explanation: .....

.....

III. SIGNATURE

I, the undersigned, state that to the best of my knowledge the above information is true and complete. It is understood that the lead agency may withdraw any declaration of nonsignificance that it might issue in reliance upon this checklist should there be any willful misrepresentation or willful lack of full disclosure on my part.

Proponent: .....

Extracted from the Washington State Environmental Policy Act Guidelines, Chapter 197-10 WAC.